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ABSTRACT

This paper considers current National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) concerns, highlights issues about the context and content of social studies, and discusses opportunities for successfully teaching social studies-related courses. The context of social studies education is examined in relation to a profile of students and society, while content is considered in terms of how social studies can best be learned by and taught to students. This document suggests that the combined efforts of scholars, teachers, publishers, and members of professional organizations have been important in identifying social studies issues and determining meaningful initiatives and that a doubling of the NCSS membership since 1984 is an indication of this organization's commitment to address important social studies issues. (JHP)

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CURRENT ISSUES IN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION AND NCSS INITIATIVES

BY

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CURRENT ISSUES IN SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION AND NCSS INITIATIVES

I want to thank members of the School Division of the Association of American Publishers for the invitation to share thoughts today on the topic, Current Issues in Social Studies and NCSS Initiatives. Let me extend a second thanks to the Association on behalf of a colleague who is instructional coordinator of mathematics in the school district where I work. He returned from a conference on the topic of mathematics which you hosted last year to say that it was perhaps the most stimulating conference he had ever attended. Now, given the fact that mathematicians generally express the most excitement about such things as the relationship between the square on the hypotenuse and the other two sides, I took his enthusiasm as the "ultimate compliment." Further, recognizing that while issues related to social studies may be 1,000 times more mystifying than problems in mathematics, they are, at least for me, 1,000 times more interesting. Social studies issues are intricate and complex. It makes me believe that we have much to gain from this conference focused on how social studies education can prepare young citizens-in-process for the challenges of a continuously changing world.

I want to highlight three issues today:

1. What is the context for social studies education? (the nature of students and the society; now and into the future)
2. What is the content of social studies? (What is important to teach and how can students best learn important content?) and
3. What are our chances for success?

I will also address several NCSS initiatives related to these issues.

Let me begin by identifying sources for the issues, facts, figures, and interpretations we will examine. First, they are issues which surface from reflection upon my own experience--experience in teaching across elementary, secondary, and university levels, and currently as instructional coordinator of social studies and director of staff development for a suburban school district. They are isssues which I meet as a commissioner on the National

Commission on Social Studies in the Schools and especially because of the privilege I have of serving as vice-president of the National Council for the Social Studies. In addition, my experience and yours includes exposure to a mass of critic and reform literature, which over the past few years in a stream of reports and dozens of books, provides various descriptions of the past and identifies a number of "perceived" problems. In some cases, critics propose specific solutions; in other cases, problems are left unresolved for other humans to solve. The critique, however, is useful. It has put social studies on the national agenda, and NCSS welcomes the resulting dialogue and professional examination as one of the richest opportunities in recent years to move social studies to new levels of quality. A third influence on the choice of issues today is insights offered to me in correspondence and discussion with hundreds of social studies educators, who over the past years, have shared and who, on a nearly daily basis in my own district, do share their views about current and future issues of importance in social studies. A final element of the perspective I share today is derived from responses provided by a sample of NCSS members to a recent survey sponsored by the National Council to determine what the concerns, needs, and predicitions of its members and potential members are by asking a representative number of them.

The Context of Social Studies Education

Let us consider first then an issue of continuing--an issue of serious importance for education in general, for social studies in particular, and for our own form of democratic society as we know it. This issue is context: What is the context for social studies (the nature of the students, the nature of society now and into the future)? Who are our students? Where do they come from? What are their special needs? What is the prognosis for a socially, civically, culturally healthy successor generation?

NCSS members, critic writers, and all of us recognize that social studies education occurs within a context--especially the context of our own society. In the recent NCSS survey, the sample of both NCSS members and potential members identifies the number one issue facing social studies educators as the problems faced by the students who come into their social studies classrooms--home life, after school work, alcohol and other drug use--factors that influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and their ability to learn. Likewise, this fall, teachers within my own district, responding to a staff development needs assessment, singled out a similar concern--how best to teach the "at risk" student. Parkway teachers identified this concern as the most pressing issue they face at all grade levels and within all subjects. In a very real sense, this is a broad educational issue. However, since social studies education

is not implemented in vacuum, since social studies is of and about society, this issue is of particular significance for social studies. Democracy's continuance and improvement depend on the education of all--those of high ability, those of low ability, those of every race, those living in rural, suburban, and urban America. The education of a strong, committed citizenry is also a major concern within the social studies. The nature of our students and society now and in the future deserves a closer look.

A recent study by James Coleman and colleagues (1) confirms that schools are most effective with children from strong supportive families. Strong supportive families foster the development of positive attitudes and a concept of self worth that give students enough confidence to benefit from teaching--confidence to attend to important content and learn it. The report details that in schools that experience the lowest dropout rate, it is primarily due to a closer relationship to the parental and broader community.

In spite of the importance of community, we all know that the communities everywhere across our land are in transition. Trends indicate that of children born in 1983, more than half (59%), before they reach age 18, will live with a single parent. (2) Our communities are changing. They are less and less characterized by two-parent families. However, the Colemann study reports that in those schools which establish a strong bond with the families and communities represented by their students, the context for learning improves and the dropout rate drastically declines.

Let me detail for you that in my own district the most severely crowded elementary school with a widely diverse student population is also the school to visit to be reassured that public education can occur in an atmosphere that fosters community. The price: regular contact between the school and every single child's family; a principal who hears every young child read to him individually and who will have had a "personal moment" centered on learning with every single child in the school by the year's end; and teachers who believe in each other and believe in the potential of every child.

Researchers conclude that a critical element in the learning process is a sense of "community." I agree that the sense of "community" is far more important, not only to educational success but to societal and citizen welfare, than some current critics suggest. This is an era in which "community" can no longer be taken for granted. How many children and youth in social studies classes have to "wonder," have to "guess," or have to be taught what "community" means? How many children experience the meaning of community for the first time, if ever, in lesson materials they study and experiences they share at the hands of a

skillful teacher within an individual classroom?

A major reason this nation placed its hope and trust in the establishment of public education has also become a major reason for social studies education--to enable and encourage students to recognize the need to move beyond a focus on self and take on citizen roles and community roles which are the "heart" of a democratic society. Social studies education from its beginning has taken seriously the challenge to make citizen roles clear and to help students learn enough and care enough to become involved in the civic life of the fragile experiment we call democracy.

Examining the "dream" in the bright light of current reality raises several crucial questions. How can all students in social studies classes come to develop a sense of community--the bedrock of a democracy? How can textbooks, other learning materials and learning experiences in social studies classes help all students begin to understand a concept such as "community" in a time when first-hand experiences related to community are available to decreasing numbers of children? How can students with a less deliberately family-nurtured sense of self be motivated to reach beyond a self they do not know well to learn of other selves in this society and in the rest of the world--the very content of social studies? What can a professional organization such as NCSS do to address the context in which social studies is and will be taught in the years to come?

As a professional organization, NCSS is supporting its 25,000 members (largely teachers) by current and emerging initiatives such as:

- -the recent survey to identify high priority needs
- -the Long Range Plan that will support identified needs financially and programatically to provide long-term continuity for NCSS programs
- -NCSS Curriculum Guidelines which emphasize that experiences and materials must support students' needs and must deal with the real social world--focus on its flaws, strengths, dangers, and promises (3).

NCSS recognizes that context also involves the nature of the community within social studies classes--a context characterized by ever increasing diversity. Minority students who now account for one-fourth of all public school enrollment will, by the year 2000, represent more than half of the students in 53 American cities.(4) NCSS has appointed a special Task Force currently working to suggest how best to increase miniority membership and participation within NCSS. The Task Force will also suggest ways to increase recruitment of teachers from minority groups for social studies classrooms in the years to come.

Likewise, each year the National Council presents the Carter G. Woodson Award. The award is made to an outstanding author who has written the book for students which most accurately and descriptively presents the contributions of minorities to our society. To illustrate how such work of the Council influences events in local school districts, I want to cite as an example a project in my own district. In Parkway, we have hosted several Carter G. Woodson award-winning authors to encourage knowledge of minorities among all our students. This spring, Milton Meltzer, a Carter G. Woodson Award winner, will visit our district to talk with students, teachers, and members of the community as a guest in our History: Fact and Fiction program. Mr. Meltzer will discuss several of his works--specifically those which present the lives of Black Americans, Chinese Americans, and Jewish Americans as represented in primary sources. This is an example of how one NCSS award--the Carter G. Woodson Award for quality literature--encourages teacher-members to emphasize for students the significance of minority contributions.

My first official responsibility as NCSS vice-president was to participate in yet another award--the Exemplary Research Award which I presented in behalf of NCSS to the Doctors Roger and David Johnson for their work in cooperative team learning. Cooperative team learning is a strategy viewed by many in NCSS as superbly suited to fostering a sense of community through cooperation among diverse students. Many students today and in the future may need to experience cooperation in the classroom if they are to experience it in any meaningful, first-hand, personal way at all. Research on the effects of cooperative team learning and affirmations I hear from social studies teachers in my district confirm the wisdom of this NCSS award because cooperative team learning promotes increased learning, greater retention of content, more in-depth, thoughtful focus, and establishes a lasting bond of community within social studies classrooms.

The Global Community:

A community composed of strong, competent, ethical individuals is the essential bond in a democratic society; and, according to leading futurists, extending the concept of "community" may well be the key element for the continuation of life on the globe. A consideration of social context raises several questions:

- What is the proper balance in textual materials and classroom experiences between an emphasis on individualism and, at the same time, an emphasis on giving of self to the common good?
- What is the proper balance between a knowledge of one's own personal, ethnic, and cultural identity and, at the same time, appreciation for

the "common core"-- the philosophy, history, structures and processes significant to citizens of the United States?

- What is the proper balance between knowledge and appreciation of American democracy, and at the same time, an appreciation of the inseparable links that bind all people and all points on the globe?

In its Essentials of Social Studies statement, NCSS has stated that "effective social studies programs help prepare young people who can identify, understand, and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world."(5)

The Content of Social Studies:

The issue of context is related to a second major issue --that of content and how it can best be learned. Clearly, the most debated issue in social studies today is the issue of "what"-- what is important to teach in social studies classes?. What should students in social studies classes learn? Several trends relate to the "what" of social studies education. First, we know that in the coming years the percentage of youth will decline overall but not among minority families (6); and by the year 2030 and thereafter, all the population growth in the United States will come from immigration (7). Second, all too often minority students are placed and remain in low track classes where the range and depth of content studied is greatly reduced (8). Third, currently far less than half (only 39%) of the graduating seniors in the nation's schools enroll for three or more years in social studies(9). Consider these realities in light of the excellence/equity issue. Consider these realities as you recall that public education was originally established to foster prepared citizens at a time when there was much less diversity in the American society than there now is or will be in the future. Consider the increasing diversity of our student population, that they spend fewer years on the average in social studies classes, and that exposure to information and intellectual rigor decline when students are severely and constantly tracked. Several imperatives are clear.

It is imperative that all of the nation's students have the opportunity and be assisted to learn the intellectually challenging and socially significant content, processes, and dispositions which derive from social studies education. It is imperative that students continue to recognize, honor and celebrate diversity and pluralism within our own society. It is also imperative that they gain knowledge of and commitment to core principles and ideals--common learnings-- that make the United States the nation it is today. Civic literacy is a must.

Global literacy is also a must. The mounting severity of a number of issues brings into possible question the continued habitability of earth. Scientists assert that we may be approaching a "point of no return" in the near future by coming ever closer to crossing nature's thresholds. The fact that many of these thresholds are not well defined means that we could exceed "the point of no return" before we know it. (9) We are all aware of transnational issues such as population and quality of air and water; but according to the Worldwatch Instutitue report for 1987,

> "deforestation, soil erosion, acidification, and desertification are undermining economic progress in scores of countries...[According to the report] Future improvements in living standards rest more heavily then ever on international cooperation. And time [time to reverse disastrous ecological trends] has suddenly become one of the scarcest of all resources...The new research agenda... will have to be global, cooperative, and interdisciplinary." (10)

It appears then that the real issues for social studies education are not whether to teach history or the social sciences, not whether to concentrate on American history or world studies, not whether to focus exclusively on history, civics, and geography, not whether to teach content, processes, or dispositions, and not whether to foster love of country or appreciation for an interdependent world, but rather how to obtain the proper balance and emphasis among all the sources of knowledge from history, geography, the social sciences, humanities and across disciplines--knowledge that students must learn in order to survive in the 21st century, and how to deliberately and directly teach so that students can learn to think about and use that knowledge to live personal and community lives of integrity, and how to teach students to apply processes of inquiry in creating new knowledge so desparately needed, and how to raise social consciousness and motivate social conscience in committed service to the nation and to humanity.

NCSS is taking an active role in efforts to address this immediate and major issue--the "what" of social studies education. NCSS has sponsored the development of scope and sequence options which begin to outline the core, the common elements of what students should know, what they should be able to do, and what dispositions and values will lead to individual, national and global stability. Members responding to the recent NCSS survey placed scope and sequence at the top of the list of issues on which NCSS should continue to focus as an organization. The Council will continue this work.

NCSS has also taken the lead, along with the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, in the call for a National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools--a commission composed of academics, classroom teachers, administrators, legislators, and other citizens who place citizen education high on the national agenda. The National Commission, which held its first meeting concurrently with this year's NCSS annual meeting in Dallas, has as a primary charge to examine what students must know, what the parameters of the social studies are, which topics merit inclusion and which topics must be abandoned as clearly outside the legitimate core defined as the domain of social studies. The National Commission's Curriculum Task Force will address the question of "what." It is the first task force appointed by the Commission and has already begun its important work.

In addition, NCSS focuses attention on the structure and teaching of history, geography and the social sciences:

- -through sessions at the annual meeting
- -through regular and special publications (e.g., a recent bulletin which provides a 50-year perspective on developments in the social sciences by academicians and includes suggestions for "best practice" from scholars who work regularly with the schools)
- -by sponsoring with the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association the History Teaching Alliance, bringing scholars and classroom teachers together
- -by promoting the Geography Teaching Alliance, and
- -by identifying and rewarding model social studies through the new NCSS Programs of Excellence project. In this new project, exemplary programs, the best in social studies education, will serve as models to illustrate how social studies instruction is making a positive and lasting impact on students when designed in congruence with NCSS curriculum standards and implemented by social studies professionals. NCSS values professionalism and keenly recognizes the deep and growing need to support collegial exchange.

The professionalization of social studies teaching and support for collegial exchange is a national issue. A recent Carnegie report revealed that 40% of the nation's teachers are leaving teaching each year because they do not feel like professionals and because they lack opportunities for professional growth (11). NCSS has recently defined elements of professionalism by developing new NCATE standards for those preparing to teach social studies and has, beyond its annual meeting, sponsored workshops and summer institutes to address professional development needs of the nation's social studies teachers.

Teachers are the key--professional social studies teachers. In my view, NCSS has two overriding commitments: to promote professionalism of social studies teachers and to elevate social studies as a major curriculum "basic" for all of the nation's students K-12. NCSS supports elementary and secondary teachers to insure that social studies instruction will begin early and be taught with professional integrity as an imperative K-12 "basic."

NCSS supports elementary social studies--social studies in the foundation years. An Elementary/Early Childhood Task Force is at work. Annual meeting attendance of elementary teachers increased from 15% of the total registration in New York to 20% in Dallas. The Dallas conference began with an elementary preconference workshop that drew so many registrants that its nearly 200 participants had to be moved to a larger room. Elementary teachers are increasingly interested in NCSS, and NCSS is interested in them. In the fall of 1988, NCSS will publish the first issue of the elementary journal, Social Studies and the Young Learner, a journal that will relate theory and research to "best practice" K-6.

NCSS also continues its long-standing commitment to secondary social studies teachers. The National Council's Public Issues Program represents one major commitment on the part of the Council to link theory, research, and teacher institutes and workshops to "best practice" in secondary social studies classrooms. The Public Issues Program includes the Great Decisions seminars (focusing on international issues), Jefferson Forums (involving students in mock constitutional debates), the National Issues Forums (highlighting discussion of major national issues), and the Roosevelt Institute Programs (involving students in engaging simulations)--all programs which emphasize active student participation. The fact that 200 high school students in my district came to a national issues forum on an evening when St. Louis was experiencing its worst electrical storm in years makes me know that students want to understand important public issues and want to think through, formulate, and share their own opinions about these issues. The Public Issues Program is proof that NCSS intends to find ways to encourage engaging teaching that results in memorable learning. Such learning includes facts, concepts, and processes, but goes beyond that which is obvious and easily measured to levels of commitment and positive action. Such learning may begin in the mind with paper and pencil, but moves on to the realm of heart and spirit.

Today, it appears that the scale is tipped in favor of demands for equal coverage in classrooms of every possible topic, followed by local and state mandates to test primarily those facts which are most easily measured. My own

experience, as I "borrow" classes to continue to have direct teaching contact with students, tells me that young, inexperienced learners, K-12, do not look at the world through the same lenses as critics and reformers. To illustrate, let me cite two personal experiences. Recently, a young second grade boy knew very well that Columbus, by mistake, called native Americans, Indians. But when I asked him where Columbus thought he had landed, the boy responded with all the confidence of youth--"Columbus called them Indians because he thought he had landed in Indianapolis." In another episode just last week, a third grade girl came up to me after a lesson introducing the three branches of government. She said, "I already knew a lot about the Supreme Court." "You did," I replied. "Oh, yes," she responded, "every day when I go home from school, my mom is watching divorce court on TV." Thank heaven there is more time--this may have been her first lesson on the three branches of government, but it certainly won't be her last. The point is clear: there is much to sort out when you are young--much to learn, and even some things to unlearn. Thankfully, learning is a lifelong process that doesn't end in our youth, our middle age, or even in our advanced years.

I begin to think about depth and coverage. I begin to feel that the issue may well be how best to achieve the optimal balance between depth and coverage; in other words, how to present enough background information to clarify and link fewer highly significant topics which receive the in-depth attention that makes them comprehensible and memorable. Topics that are introduced in textbooks and enriched through highly involving projects, active participation and applications such as those represented by the Public Issues Program, promote background exposure and the intensity of in-depth focus necessary if students are to learn, to remember, to care, and to commit to improving life for themselves and others.

The Chances for Success:

However, we might ask as we examine our final issue: What are our chances for success? Will today's students commit? Do they care enough to connect with society and improve it? I believe the answer is clearly, yes; and to offer evidence, I want to share a brief snapshot of a young man--a high school student whose name is Steve. Steve is not your typical high school senior. His father is in prison for rape. His mother has spent time in jail and is suspected of drug dealing. A brother is wanted for questioning in a robbery; and Steve--Steve is on the honor roll at the high school he attends. He puts it quite simply: "I want to do something worthwhile with my life."

How do we explain it? Can this miracle be traced to a classroom, a sense of community, specific content studied, a

curious mind that demands to learn, a refusal to be counted down and out?

While we can't be absolutely sure of what has or will motivate someone like Steve who has every reason to give up and won't, we can, as those who cherish social studies education as our nation's best opportunity for all, take a clue from Ernest Boyer about our own responsibility. Boyer states:

> If we value our country and our heritage, we must invest in our children. We owe them a legacy of hope... In every child who is born...the potentiality of the human race is born again.' There should never be a child--let alone a generation of children--who passes through our schools unawakened and unprepared for what will come. Educating a new generation of Americans to their full potential is still our most compelling obligation. Every morning at 8 a.m. the doors of America's [high] schools are opened. Walk inside and look into the future."

I agree with Ernest Boyer and believe that as long as there is one student like Steve, one who is determined to "connect" with society no matter what the obstacles, we owe to him or her--and we owe to every child-- a legacy of hope, a recognition of individual worth, and a realization that each and every one of them is the future.

I readily concede to you that it is impossible to explore all the issues related to teaching and learning in social studies or all the NCSS initiatives designed to promote excellence. However, I am convinced we do have before us a most worthy purpose. I am convinced that our combined perspectives--our combined efforts as scholars, teachers, publishers, members of professional organizations--to identify issues and define meaningful initiatives is profoundly worthwhile. Finally, I am convinced that a doubling of NCSS membership--a 56% increase in membership in the past four years-- is an unmistakable signal that the National Council for the Social Studies is recognizing and is addressing issues taken to be important by thousands of teachers across the nation--thousands of teachers who stand face to face daily with the Steves of the world and all of their students to see them for what they are--indeed the future.

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